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Migrant Farmworkers Challenge Popular Image

Migrant farmworkers are not a homogeneous group and so cannot be easily characterized. Consequently, the stereotype of low-income, middle-aged, and Hispanic or black applies to only a small percentage of migrants. The total number of migrants, furthermore, is small and most of them undertake migrant farmwork for only part of the year. This article highlights the findings of a 1981 Census/USDA survey.

Despite the long-term interest in the social and economic conditions of migrant farmworkers, there continues to be a shortage of information on this segment of the rural labor force. The paucity of data has led to speculation and generalization about them. However, rural development efforts to improve the living and working conditions of migrants must be based on an accurate portrait of these workers.

Correcting the Image

Migrant farmworkers are usually thought of as a large group of low-income, middle-aged, mostly Hispanic and black workers, who harvest the Nation's fruits and vegetables. They are often visualized as working in crews organized by farm labor contractors and traveling long distances through numerous States. They are characterized as having few labor market skills, little education, and little opportunity for employment in higher wage occupations. Their low incomes are generally attributed to their strong attachment to low-wage agricultural work, and they are considered to be one of the most disadvantaged groups of workers in the United States.

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However, this picture is not entirely correct and many of the Nation's migrant farmworkers do not fit this image. For example:

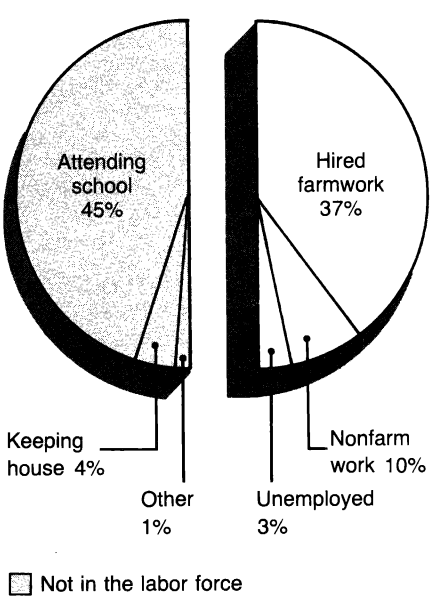
- Migrants do not comprise a large group of farmworkers. In 1981, there were 115,000 migrant farmworkers 14 years of age and over who crossed county or State boundaries and stayed overnight to do hired farmwork. They accounted for only 5 percent of the 2.5 million hired farmworkers in 1981 and less than 1 percent of the U.S. employed work force.
- Most migrants tend to be young, rather than middle-aged. About 56 percent were between 14 and 25 years of age and the majority of these were attending school most of the year. The median age of migrants was 23 years.
- Most migrant farmworkers are white, not Hispanic or black. Minorities accounted for only a fourth of the Nation's migrant work force, although the proportions varied depending on region. This inconsistency between perception and fact may partly arise from the large number of illegal aliens from Mexico and other Latin American countries who are probably not counted in the survey data reported here but who have a great deal of public visibility, especially in the Southwest. (For more information on foreign workers on U.S. farms, see the accompanying article by Robert Coltrane.)
- Migrants do not work primarily in fruit and vegetable production. In 1981, they were as likely to be working with cotton, tobacco, and grains, as they were to be working on fruit, nut, and vegetable farms.
- Many migrants do not travel long distances to harvest crops and most do not travel with farm labor contractors. Over half of all migrants traveled less than 500 miles a year to reach their farm jobs; about 26 percent traveled 1,000 miles or more. Although this is a considerble distance compared with most who commute to jobs, the data do not support the idea that most migrants travel long distances through many different States.

The Survey

The data in this article are based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Hired Farm Working Force Survey of 1981. The survey is conducted biennially by the Bureau of the Census for USDA as a supplementary part of the December Current Population Survey. For more details about the survey's findings and methodology, see *The Hired Farm Working Force of 1981* (AER-507; Susan L. Pollack and William R. Jackson, Jr., U.S. Department of Agriculture, Nov. 1983) available for $2.00 from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. Order GPO stock number 001-000-04370-6.

Migrant farmworkers are defined in this survey as all persons who crossed county lines and stayed overnight to do hired farmwork. The survey data may underestimate the actual number of migrant farmworkers since it probably does not include most illegal aliens who enter this country each year to do migrant farmwork. Many illegal aliens had returned home before the December survey and others tended to avoid survey enumerators. Thus, the data reported in this article generally reflect the numbers and characteristics of the domestic migrant farm work force.

Figure 1
Primary employment status of migrant farmworkers, 1981



Mrs. Jose Lopez, a former Los Angeles school teacher, belies the stereotype of migrant farmworkers having little education. USDA photo.

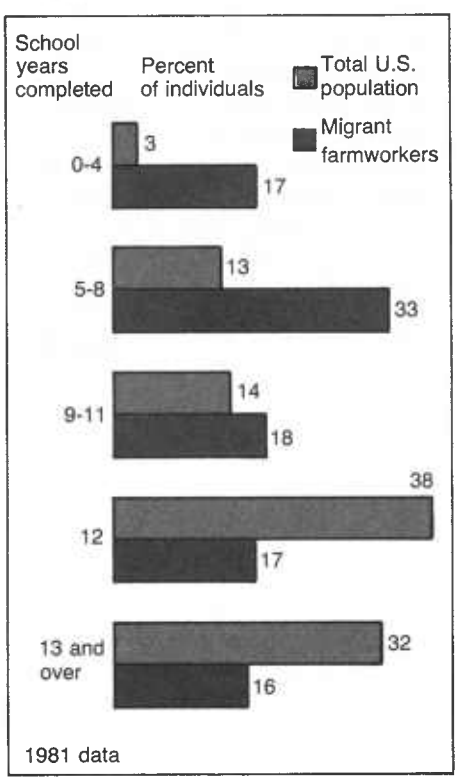
• Only 17 percent of the migrants in 1981 said they were recruited or transported by a crew leader. Most of the 250,000 persons who worked with a crew leader in 1981 did not cross county lines and stay overnight to do hired farmwork.

Educational and Economic Characteristics

Some elements of the general migrant image are supported by the survey data. Migrant farmworkers, for example, have less education than the rest of the U.S. population (fig. 1). In 1981, migrants 25 years of age and over had completed a median 8.6 years of school compared with 12.5 years for the general population. Almost 70 percent of the migrants had not completed high school and 17 percent were functionally illiterate (fewer than 5 years of school).

Also, consistent with the low-wage image of migrant farmwork, the earnings of migrant workers were considerably less than those of other workers. In 1981, migrants averaged about $3,995 in total earnings compared with over $13,000 received by all U.S. nonagricultural production workers. However, these low earnings reflect the large number of seasonal workers, students, and homemakers, who intentionally work only a few weeks at farmwork during the year and are probably not responsible for the main share of the family support. For example, migrants who did hired farmwork or nonfarm work as their major activity averaged $6,716 in total earnings. Students, homemakers, and others out of the labor force most of the year averaged $1,597.

Figure 2
Migrant farmworkers received less schooling than rest of Nation age 25 years and over



It is difficult to evaluate the economic status of workers based on earnings alone. Other factors such as family income and family size should also be considered. In 1981, migrant farmworker families had a median family income of $15,000, considerably lower than the median income of $20,000 for all U.S. families. However, migrant family income was higher than the $13,000 median income for all hired farmworker families. Based on family income and size criteria similar to the official Federal poverty guidelines in 1981, 28 percent of migrant families were defined as low income, about the same percentage as all hired farmworker families. However, these figures do not reflect the costs of transportation, lodging, or food while in transit.

Another indicator of economic status is homeownership. Three out of five migrants owned or were buying their home or lived with a family that did. Thus, most families containing a migrant farmworker would probably not be defined as low income.

Farmwork a Sideline for Many Migrants

Migrant farmworkers have diverse employment experiences and many of these workers are involved in activities other than farmwork during most of the year. For example, only

37 percent of the migrants cited hired farmwork as their primary activity (fig. 2). Many of them held a series of migrant and nonmigrant farm jobs during the year; most did not work at nonfarm jobs. They generally averaged more days of farmwork than other migrants and thus had higher farm earnings. Because of their dependence on low-wage farmwork, however, their total earnings tended to be low.

This group (whose farmwork is their primary activity) closely resembles the general image of migrant farmworkers discussed above. These workers were more likely than other migrants to be minorities, to be older, and to work in fruit, nut, and vegetable production. In addition, their levels of education and family income were lower than those of the other migrants.

Another 10 percent of migrant farmworkers worked primarily in nonfarm occupations but did some migrant farmwork during the year. They worked only a few days at farmwork and because of their higher paying nonfarm jobs, their total earnings were higher than those of migrants employed primarily in farmwork.

A third group, accounting for 50 percent of the migrant workers, was comprised largely of students and homemakers who were in the labor force only part of the year. These workers did migrant farmwork for only a few days or weeks during the spring and summer. Some were earning spending money for their personal use, while others were contributing to overall family income. The remaining 3 percent of the migrants were unemployed for most of the year.

The findings make clear the considerable diversity in the social and economic characteristics of migrant farmworkers. This diversity is an important consideration in the development of farm labor policies and programs to improve the living and working conditions of the Nation's migrant farmworkers. One set of policies and programs, for example, might be directed specifically to the educationally and economically disadvantaged migrants who depend heavily on farmwork for a significant part of their income. About a third of all migrants fall into this category. Efforts to help this group should focus on the issues of increased employment stability, improved wages and benefits, and improved levels of family well-being, including health, housing, and education of family members.

Another set of policies might be aimed at all migrants, regardless of their characteristics, attachment to farmwork, or low-income status. Such efforts should focus on employee benefits and workplace protections generally available to other U.S. workers, including minimum wage guarantees, farm safety regulations, workers' compensation, and unemployment insurance. In recent years, these protections have increased for farmworkers, although most of these Federal and State programs still have special exemptions for agriculture, based on the size of the farm operation.

Some migrants experience severe economic and educational problems and Federal, State, and local community efforts may all be needed to help improve their well-being. However, farm labor policies and programs designed to help them are likely to be most effective when based on accurate knowledge of the migrant population. We still need to improve information on this segment of the rural labor force. RDP

Sigurd R. Nilsen and Frank A. Fratoe

Job Training Partnership Act, CETA, and Rural Communities

The Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) which replaced CETA (the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) a year ago, includes some new provisions that may work better than CETA in addressing rural unemployment issues. The principal objective of the new act is not appreciably different from that of CETA—to prepare certain groups of youths and unskilled adults for entry into the labor force and to provide job training to some economically disadvantaged groups.

In this article, we briefly describe JTPA, highlight its differences from CETA, and outline some of its potential impacts on rural areas. Our interest in JTPA stems from the indifferent success of earlier employment legislation in meeting the special needs of rural people and small communities. An assessment of early CETA and pre-CETA public service employment programs found the pattern of funding to favor urban areas.[1] Funding of JTPA for fiscal year 1984 is estimated to be about the same level as during 1983, approximately $3½ billion, down from the FY 1979 peak for CETA of nearly $10 billion (table 1).

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[1] Martin, Philip L. "Public Service Employment and Rural America" *American Journal of Agricultural Economics,* 1977, 59(2), pp.257–82.